

# Embodying Other Minds: Engaging with Autism through Participatory Performance

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**Abstract.** My research explores dialogues between performance and science to consider how concepts such as embodied cognition, theory of mind and kinesthetic empathy are changing our understanding of performance processes, practices and reception. My work also explores the potential of performance to impact upon science through an applied theatre project which is transforming approaches to and understanding of the experience and behaviours of people with autism. This is leading to the development of new epistemologies for exploring and conceptualizing imagination, emotion and memory in conditions involving atypical neurocognitive make up.

My paper makes reference to Imagining Autism an interdisciplinary project using contemporary theatre techniques, puppetry and interactive media as a means of facilitating communication, social interaction, empathy and imagination for autistic children. The practices developed are predicated on the principles of embodied cognition and this has also influenced our distinctive approach to training. My paper will demonstrate these approaches, exploring how participatory performance is a means to generate new understandings of autism and related conditions as relational processes rather than diagnostic fixities as well as offering insights into the experience of perceiving differently.

**Nicki Shaughnessy** is Professor of Performance in the University of Kents School of Arts and is Director of the research centre for Cognition, Kinesthetics and Performance. Her research and teaching interests are in the areas of applied theatre, contemporary performance, dramatic auto/biography, cognition and performance and practice based pedagogies. She has been Head of Drama in three university departments has managed drama projects in a range of educational, social and community settings. She collaborates with researchers from other disciplines to explore the processes of making performance and its affects on participants. Her current research explores the imagination in autism (film documentary and practical research), performing psychologies and interdisciplinary modes of performance training.

Recent publications are her edited collection *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being* (Methuen, 2013) and *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (Palgrave, 2012). Previous work includes *Gertrude Stein for the Writers and their Work* series (Northcote House, 2007) and she is co-editor of *Margaret Woffington: in the Lives of Shakespearean Actors* series (Pickering & Chatto, 2008). She is series editor with Professor John Lutterbie for Methuens new *Performance and Science: Interdisciplinary Dialogues* series.

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